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Lena Dominelli (2012). **Green Social Work. From  
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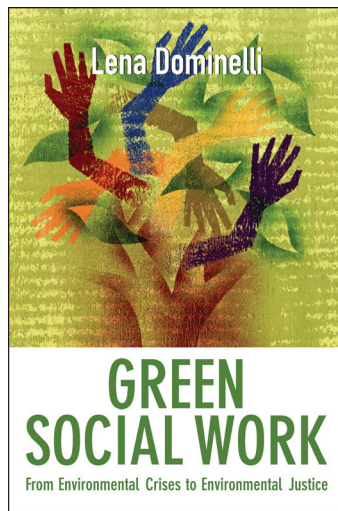
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## BOOKS

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### THE GREEN VOLUNTARISM OF LENA DOMINELLI

Until recently, we were not used to associating  
ecological issues or sustainable development  
with social work practice, let alone considering  
them an integral part of it. However, the  
relentless ecological crisis has changed all that.  
Since the turn of the century, the amount  
of research involving this phenomenon has  
grown to the extent that it is impossible

to ignore, as has the number of relevant  
publications (Peeters, 2012a). Furthermore,  
sustainability has become an increasingly  
relevant topic at international social work  
events, such as the 2011 ENSACT Conference  
in Brussels and the 2012 World Congress  
in Stockholm. It has resulted in the creation  
of quite a number of new terms describing  
the relationship between ecology and  
social work practice, such as the *eco-social  
approach* (Matthies, Nāhri & Ward, 2001) or

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*environmental social work* (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012), and *green social work* in this book by Lena Dominelli.

First, we can only applaud the fact that Dominelli is willing to support the broad agenda of social-ecological justice and the resulting social change. Moreover, her book deserves particular praise for its remarkably broad account of the range of ecological issues that social workers all over the world have to deal with, and how they deal with them. Quite a number of case studies are included as illustrations.

We do not have the space to discuss all the topics covered in the book here, but to summarize they include industrialization and urbanization; industrial pollution and environmental degradation; climate change, renewable energy and social problems; the relationship between environmental crises, social conflict and mass migration; marginal and social exclusion in relation to natural disasters; scarcity of resources and inter-country conflict resolution; world views of indigenous peoples, their struggles and the reframing of relationships to living environments. As such, we are given a broad view of the social impact of environmental problems and the work being done by social workers in this field, including a wealth of information. This is one of the main reasons to recommend this book to anyone not

familiar with this topic. However, others will find that this book offers new elements as well.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether a mainly descriptive approach is sufficient reason to write a new book, particularly since the discussion on the relationship between ecology and social work has been underway for quite some time already. In relation to other authors, Dominelli comments that: "Given its scope and range, *Green Social Work* aims to break new ground" (p. 6), but it is unclear whether the book succeeds in this respect. For the sake of the discussion, we would like to add some background information by first explaining Dominelli's current position in this debate. Obviously, some of the terms mentioned above display similarities – but also differences – particularly in relation to systems thinking. Despite the subtle differences, Dominelli seems to share the concerns of the authors mentioned.

Being green in social work encapsulates a holistic approach that addresses both personal behaviour and the structural facets of social organization and marginality to argue for mutuality and solidarity in solving social problems that are rooted in an unequal distribution of: the Earth's resources; its technological innovations; and social provisions that can be employed to enhance human well-being. These have to be spread across the globe while at the same time acknowledging interdependencies between peoples

and other living things, and showing respect for the Earth's limited physical resources, its flora and fauna. (p. 6)

What does this mean for social practice?

I define "green" social work as that part of practice that intervenes to protect the environment and enhance people's well-being by integrating the interdependencies between people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments, and among peoples within an egalitarian framework that addresses prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources. (p. 8)

Clearly, Dominelli stresses two things: a holistic understanding of these relationships as opposed to the instrumental relationship between people and their environment; and the political nature of the action necessary to achieve the desired goal. To this end, green social work builds on the "insights of radical and anti-oppressive social work" (p. 25). And today, it means "[challenging] the fundamental bases of an unequalitarian social system currently rooted in a neoliberal capitalist globalisation" (p. 26). That is why social workers must take action regardless of the situations in which they are employed, which inevitably leads to wide diversity in the practice of green social work. In chapter 2, which is entitled "A professional crisis within social environmental calamities", Dominelli states that

the professionals must free themselves from their current dependence on the dominant social systems in order to be able to support the concerns and actions of individual workers.

Social work suffers from a professional crisis of confidence that means that it is not proactive in either defining its borders or developing in new directions. However, individual practitioners are constantly innovating to address the needs of those with whom they work and embedding their activities in new theories and approaches to practice. Green social work provides opportunities for innovation that can deal with issues of poverty, urbanization and a holistic approach to sustainable development. (p. 41)

Clearly, Dominelli is determined to distinguish herself from other authors in the same field who take a more limited angle and who tend to build on the systems approach of mainstream social work. This approach looks at people in their social environment but neglects their broader ecological context as well as the "power relations based on existing geo-political social structures, even though these define identity issues, power relations and resource distribution" (p. 26). However, the same criticism has also been expressed by a number of systems thinkers in relation to the theoretical developments mentioned above. Authors such as Coates (2003) and Matthies *et al.* (2001) take this criticism as a reason to interpret

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systems thinking differently and link it to a political approach for the purpose of creating a generic model of social work practice. Dominelli ignores this, thereby revealing – in our opinion – a conceptual weakness in her approach. After all, how can we support action to face the current global crisis without being able to rely on insights from systems thinking? In our opinion, these are essential for a genuinely *holistic* approach, and therefore essential for a generic practice model.

In our view, social work will have to reconsider social-ecological systems thinking because this is particularly important to understand a crucial system characteristic such as *resilience* (Peeters, 2012b), a concept which Dominelli repeatedly applies to express the goals of green social work. In addition, she distinguishes clearly between reactive and proactive types of resilience (Dovers & Handmer, 1992). The former put too great an emphasis on adaptation in order to consolidate the status quo. Yet, “by prioritizing stability over other concerns, adaptive approaches can endanger the future viability of the system” (p. 66). Rather, current and future crises require *proactive resilience* which is based on inevitable change and the adjustments we need to make accordingly. “Resilient responses can [...] provide a cushion of certainty in uncertain conditions” (p. 66). Nevertheless, it remains unclear what this means for social work practice because Dominelli does not provide any insight into the system logic that

underlies resilience, which is rather surprising since she emphasizes its importance on several occasions. Throughout the book she lists the things that social workers can do, but with no conceptual analysis and/or relation. This leaves ample room for ambiguous interpretations. For example:

Assessing and enhancing resilience is crucial to community enterprises aiming to create resilient communities [that] are better able to manage and control change. The capacity to manage and control change according to one's wishes is a feature of robust resilience. (p. 133)

Without a proper understanding of the characteristic dynamics of systems, *manage and control change* could be interpreted as traditional management terms. I assume that it was not Dominelli's intention, given her focus on participative practice from the bottom up. Yet, understanding system dynamics could also support her desire to achieve structural changes in another way. The question is not merely how resilience can become the solution to changes that occur in any case – an aspect which receives ample attention because of the focus on problems and “disasters”. However, it is much more important to consider how resilience can be used as a strategic tool to achieve positive change. However, the conceptual question of “how” vanishes in the lists mentioned above. As a result, the broad and essential agenda which Dominelli

mentions remains largely a matter of voluntarism.

Furthermore, these remarks on resilience illustrate a general lack of thorough analysis and conceptual discussion. You will only find a few instances of this in the book – such as the discussion of *environmental justice* and *sustainable development* – and these remain poorly developed. It is the lack of a consistent framework for social work practice in particular which will leave readers of this book ultimately unsatisfied. Nonetheless, as the following quote demonstrates, the importance of community empowerment through social movements with respect to resilience, and for the purpose of networking and cooperation with professionals from other fields, is constantly brought to the readers' attention:

[...] to provide a decent quality of life for all living things, sustain the material environment and ensure the existence of all these in both the present and the future. Social workers have a pivotal role to play in this through the mobilization of communities in empowering processes that link the local to the global and the global to the local, in one world that has to be shared for the benefit of all. (p. 207)

These are, without doubt, valid approaches and the pivotal role of community work is clearly illustrated through the case studies. Nevertheless, we are more interested in finding

a coherence between the practices listed in the book than in general statements, if we want to go beyond mere voluntarism. Hence, it remains unclear whether Dominelli has a generic practice model for social work in mind. If we consider the above description of green social work as “that part of practice”, we do not think she has such a model in mind. But she finishes the book by writing this: “At the end of the day, green social work offers a model for good social work practice” (p. 207). One way or the other, the question of “how” remains. We want to illustrate the importance of a coherent vision of social work with two examples.

In chapter 5 on climate change, the discussion of international treaties mainly focuses on the relationship between states and the role of intermediary which can be played by international social work in order to break the current deadlock. From an anti-oppressive point of view, you would expect more emphasis on inequalities, both global and national, of which the poor are the major victims. As a result, it becomes increasingly urgent to discover the interplay between diplomacy and action and between social work and international social movements.

At the other end of the spectrum, the question arises of how social case work relates to community work, since green social work attributes a crucial role to community work in social work practice. Wherever community

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work constitutes the basis, such as in many places in the global South, this is not considered an issue. However, if Dominelli's goal is to reassess the profession, it becomes a crucial issue in the traditional industrialized countries where working with individuals and their families actually constitutes the greater part of contemporary social work. Thus, the question again arises of how the common systems approach relates to a community-oriented and politicized form of empowerment in contemporary social work practice. And from a "green" perspective, it remains essential to expand the relevant context from the merely social to the genuinely ecological.

In short, Dominelli has put forward a crucial agenda and illustrated its relevance to social work by giving a large number of examples, and this makes the book worth reading. However, there are too many conceptual loose ends for readers to gain a genuinely innovative insight into social work practice through the author's rather descriptive approach.

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